



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Species Status Assessment Framework

*An Integrated Framework for Conservation*

*“The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday’s logic.”*

– Peter Drucker

The Species Status Assessment (SSA) Framework is an analytical approach developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to deliver foundational science for informing all Endangered Species Act (ESA) decisions. An SSA is a focused, repeatable, and rigorous scientific assessment. The result will be better assessments, improved and more transparent and defensible decision making, and clearer and more concise documents. Benefits of this approach are being realized, and as the Service fully transitions to the SSA Framework approach greater benefits are anticipated.

Ideally, the SSA is conducted at or prior to the candidate assessment or 12-month finding stage, but can be initiated at any time. The SSA is designed to “follow the species” in the sense that the information on the biological status is available for conservation use and can be updated with new information. Thus, the SSA provides a single source for species’ biological information needed for all ESA decisions (e.g., listing, consultations, grant allocations, permitting, HCPs, and recovery planning). The biological analysis and the resulting stand-alone science-focused assessment allow for State and partner engagement in the science used to base ESA decisions. Early identification of what most influence the species’ condition affords timely opportunities to work with partners to implement conservation efforts in advance of potential ESA decisions.

*“The Species Status Assessment is a unique opportunity to transform how the Fish and Wildlife Service delivers conservation.”*

– Gary Frazer, Assistant Director Ecological Services Program  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, DC

## Realized Benefits

**Defensibility** – analysis grounded in accepted science and a logical process with stated assumptions and complete reasoning clearly informs our ESA decisions.

**Consistency** – consistent framework and terminology is used across all ESA functions across all regions and field offices.

**Clarity** – by identifying the roles of science and policy in ESA decision making, and having structured processes for each results in increased transparency.

**Efficiency** – structured and repeatable biological analysis saves time. Stand alone science documents provide savings that could best be used for active conservation.

**Effectiveness** – clearly articulated reasoned decisions foster effective communication and improved opportunities for conservation.

**Collaboration** – a better forum for being inclusive; partners are involved to understand and support biological analysis.



New Mexico meadow jumping mouse.  
Credit: USFWS

## Species Status Assessment Framework

### SPECIES' NEEDS



Current Availability  
or Condition of  
those Needs

### CURRENT SPECIES' CONDITION



Future Availability  
or Condition of  
those Needs

### FUTURE SPECIES' CONDITION

An SSA begins with a compilation of the best available information on the species (taxonomy, life history, and habitat) and its ecological needs at the individual, population, and/or species levels based on how environmental factors are understood to act on the species and its habitat. Next, an SSA describes the current condition of the species' habitat and demographics, and the probable explanations for past and ongoing changes in abundance and distribution within the species' ecological settings (i.e., areas representative of geographic, genetic, or life history variation across the range of the species). Lastly, an SSA forecasts the species' response to probable future scenarios of environmental conditions and conservation efforts. Overall, an SSA uses the conservation biology principles of resiliency, redundancy, and representation (collectively known as the "3Rs") as a lens to evaluate the current and future condition of the species. As a result, the SSA characterizes a species' ability to sustain populations in the wild over time based on the best scientific understanding of current and future abundance and distribution within the species' ecological settings.

An SSA is in essence a biological risk assessment to aid decision makers who must use the best available scientific information to make policy decisions. The SSA provides decision makers with a scientifically rigorous characterization of species status that focuses on the likelihood that the species will sustain populations within its ecological settings along with key uncertainties in that characterization. The SSA does not result in a decision directly, but it provides the best available scientific information for comparison to policy standards to guide ESA decisions.



Gunnison's prairie dog. Credit: USFWS

*"The SSA is an intuitive framework that helped me clearly and quickly develop, explain, and write our biological analysis to support the ESA determination for Gunnison's prairie dog."*

*- Craig Hansen, USFWS Species Lead for Gunnison's prairie dog*

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